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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 001803

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SUBJECT: TURKEY ELECTION SCENESETTER AND NEXT STEPS

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROSS WILSON FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

11. (C) Summary: PM Erdogan's governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) will likely come out on top July 22, winning fewer seats than in 2002, but enough to form a government. At least two other parties will surmount the 10% threshold, and parliament seems likely to be more fractious than it has been for the past five years. The proof will be in the post-July 22 pudding, when parliament must elect a speaker, form a government and elect a president. Domestic politics will continue to preoccupy Turkey for the next six to ten weeks, making progress difficult on any external issues. End Summary.

July 22 Parliamentary Election

12. (C) As we move into the final week of campaigning, most polls put the AKP at 35-40%, Deniz Baykal's main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) around 20%, and Devlet Bahceli's National Action Party (MHP) in the 10-15% range. Polls here are unreliable, and Turkish elections are known for surprises. With at least 15% of the electorate still undecided, MHP and Genc (Cem Uzan's populist Youth Party) could do unexpectedly well; Mehmet Agar's Democrat Party might squeek across the threshold; and the AKP's support may be over-estimated. Some 20-30 independents are also likely to enter parliament, most linked to the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP). The actual seat breakdown will depend on how many parties surmount the 10% threshold and vote totals in specific districts. Absent surprises, AKP likely will garner around 300 seats (out of 550), fewer than the 365 seats it won in 2002.

13. (C) Wildcards that could influence the election include the terrorist PKK and the possibility of a cross-border operation (CBO), a major gaffe, some new pronouncement by the military (which has been pretty quiet for weeks) or a natural disaster. At this juncture, a spectacular urban PKK attack followed by a CBO is the most worrisome factor.

14. (C) In our travels around the country, key issues have been the economy and unemployment, terrorism (with a focus on why the US hasn't done anything to, in Turks' view, bring Barzani into line), crime and secularism. The economy works in AKP's favor, except in rural areas where farmers are less than happy. The terrorism issue -- which CHP and MHP continue to flog hard -- works against it, except in the

southeast. However, Turkey's electorate appears to be very polarized. Voter turnout is expected to be high (in part because it is compulsory, though the fine for not voting is negligible).

15. (C) If AKP does well, it will be because Turks feel better off than they did 5 years ago and because the alternatives remain mediocre. AKP will get some sympathy vote from liberals and others angry at the military and the CHP over their behavior in April and May. Despite many voters' distaste for CHP's Baykal, his effectiveness on the campaign trail will earn him some votes, and still others will hold their nose and vote CHP "for the sake of the country."

16. (C) Whatever the election's results, it will not diffuse the intense divides and polarization in society. A strengthened opposition, marked by the MHP's vocal nationalism, will prove raucous and difficult on issues of interest to us (including the PKK, Kurds, Iraq, minority issues, EU accession, Armenia, economic reform and privatization, among others). Should CHP and MHP do considerably better than expected and deprive the AKP of a clear majority, they may be asked by President Sezer to form a coalition government. Leaders of both these parties have been publicly cool to that possibility. If the AKP vs. CHP/MHP numbers are close, the DTP/independents could hold the balance of power. DTPers in parliament will mean fireworks from the start. Whatever they say, their very presence will rile the MHP and fan hysterical press commentary and speculation.

Post-July 22

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17. (C) Turkey's political turmoil will continue post-election for at least another four to eight weeks. Parliament will convene within about a week of the voting, after the official results are promulgated. Parliament's first task will be to elect a new speaker and speakership board. If the AKP has a clear majority, this may be relatively simple, unless the opposition boycotts the voting and sustains the position that a 367-seat quorum is needed. After that, the following are likely to happen concurrently: (1) President Sezer's designation of someone to form a government. By tradition, the honor usually goes to the party that won a plurality, but the constitution does not specify this. (2) The election of a new president, which must be accomplished within 30 days once the process begins) presumably soon after a speaker is elected. (3) A vote of confidence for the new government. This must occur within 45 days.

18. (C) The hardest task -- and a bellwether of how well the new parliament will function -- will be the presidential election. Given the Constitutional Court-imposed 367-seat quorum, this must be accomplished by consensus, a subject of considerable election campaign rhetoric, with all major party leaders touting the need for consensus in some form. Finding the right candidate will be all the trickier since, with the constitutional reform package that includes direct election of the president set to go to referendum in October, speculation abounds that the new president might well step down after some interval to allow for a popularly elected successor. Among names cited in the press as "compromise" candidates are Defense Minister Gonul, former Foreign Minister Hikmet Cetin and even former TGS CHOD Gen. Hilmi Ozkok. It is impossible now to assess how plausible any of these names may be. Consensus politics would seem to preclude FM Gul or any other AKP figure like him.

19. (C) Negotiations and politicking will be difficult. The ultimate compromise candidate may only be unveiled at the 11th hour, as has been the case in previous presidential elections. Should parliament fail to elect a new president during the 30 day period provided in the constitution,

parliament will be dissolved, and voters will return to the ballot box. This may give the AKP some leverage to cajole the opposition to agree on someone. Its deeper pockets will leave it better prepared than others for renewed campaigning.

Any new ballot might coincide with the October 21 referendum on the AKP's very popular constitutional reform for the direct election of the president. An even greater incentive to avoid new elections will be the desire of MPs to stay in office; after serving just two years, they receive a life-long pension.

¶10. (C) The likely AKP-led government will have some serious changes. Gul may well not return as foreign minister. -- Speaker is one possibility -- and Economic Minister Babacan may move up as FM, with economist Mehmet Simsek filling in behind. Rumors abound of replacements at the Interior Ministry, Finance Ministry and elsewhere. The sweeping alterations PM Erdogan made to the AKP parliamentary candidate line-up suggest he may intend big changes in his new government as well.

Implications for US

¶11. (C) Regardless of what happens at the ballot box, political figures will remain internally focused for at least the next six to ten weeks. It will remain extremely difficult to get serious government attention on most issues of interest to us. The next government may be harder to work with because it will enjoy a narrower majority, and some in the AKP predict that disappointment over alleged US unwillingness to confront the Turkish military and the PKK will be problems for us in the period ahead. We should continue to keep a low profile on partisan issues. Keeping the Armenian genocide resolution off the agenda until this political cycle sorts itself out will be important.

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